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Höfleser Hauptstrasse 50 D, 90427 Nürnberg, Germany; and Wolfsleite 5,
91074 Herzogenaurach, Germany, respectively, have invented certain new and
useful improvements in a

TRANSPORT SYSTEM FOR ARTICLES, IN PARTICULAR
CONTAINERS FOR BAGGAGE PIECES, AND CONTROL METHOD
FOR THE TRANSPORT SYSTEM

of which the following is a complete specification:

TRANSPORT SYSTEM FOR ARTICLES, IN PARTICULAR CONTAINERS FOR BAGGAGE PIECES, AND CONTROL METHOD FOR THE TRANSPORT SYSTEM

CROSS-REFERENCES TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

[0001] This application claims the priority of German Patent Application, Serial No. 102 55 344.0, filed November 27, 2002, pursuant to 35 U.S.C. 119(a)-(d), the disclosure of which is incorporated herein by reference.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0002] The present invention relates to a transport system for articles, in particular containers for baggage pieces. The present invention further relates to a control method for such a transport system.

[0003] Conventional transport systems for articles are known which include two or more conveyors, superposed in vertically spaced-apart planes, and an elevator, bridging the distance between the conveyors and having a horizontal elevator conveyor to form a transport path with the upper conveyor and a transport path with the lower conveyor. The articles are transferred in conveying direction of the respective transport path either from the elevator to the

conveyors or, vice versa, from the conveyors to the elevator. A control unit controls the transport of the articles by operating the conveyors, when the elevator has reached the respective end positions in alignment with the conveyors. A transport system of this type has the drawback that the flow of articles is slowed down by the operation of the elevator.

[0004] It would therefore be desirable and advantageous to provide an improved transport system to obviate prior art shortcomings and to enable a high transport rate for articles.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0005] According to one aspect of the present invention, a transport system for articles, in particular containers for baggage pieces, includes at least two conveyors disposed in vertically spaced-apart planes to define an upper conveyor and a lower conveyor, an elevator having an elevator conveyor and movable in a vertical direction between a lower end position in which the elevator conveyor is in alignment with the lower conveyor to form a lower transport path for transfer of articles from the lower conveyor to the elevator, and an upper end position in which the elevator conveyor is in alignment with the upper conveyor to form an upper transport path for transfer of articles from the upper conveyor to the elevator, and a control unit to control the transfer of the articles from the conveyors to the elevator and from the elevator to the conveyors in dependence

on a vertical position of the elevator, with the control unit including a signaling assembly having a first signaling member associated to one of the planes for indicating that the elevator has reached an upper trigger position in relation to the one plane during movement from the lower end position to the upper end position, and a second signaling member associated to the other one of the planes for indicating that the elevator has reached a lower trigger position in relation to the other plane during movement from the upper end position to the lower end position.

[0006] The present invention resolves prior art problems by providing the control unit with a signaling assembly to indicate the approach of the elevator toward the upper and lower end positions of the elevator by defining predetermined trigger positions and to thereby trigger operation of the elevator conveyor, when reaching the upper and lower end positions. Thus, the elevator conveyor runs before the elevator reaches the end positions.

[0007] According to another feature of the present invention, each of the two conveyors and the conveyor of the elevator may include a continuous conveyor belt and a drive motor for operating the conveyor belt.

[0008] According to another feature of the present invention, the first and second signaling members may be configured as sensors. Examples of sensors include light barrier, light scanner, inductive sensor, and ultrasonic sensor.

[0009] According to another feature of the present invention, the control unit is constructed to initiate a movement of the articles in response to the signaling assembly, when the elevator reaches the trigger positions. In this way, the transport rate for articles is high. An even higher rate can be realized, when the upper conveyor is rendered operative by the control unit for moving the articles, when the elevator reaches the upper trigger position, and the lower conveyor is rendered operative by the control unit for moving the articles, when the elevator reaches the lower trigger position.

[0010] According to another feature of the present invention, the control unit can be constructed to initiate the movement of the articles after elapse of a predetermined delay time. Suitably, the delay time can be made dependent on a start-up speed of the elevator.

[0011] According to another aspect of the present invention, a method of transporting articles, in particular containers for baggage pieces, includes the steps of providing an elevator which has an elevator conveyor and is movable between a lower conveyor and an upper conveyor which are spaced-apart in a vertical direction to thereby define a lower end position in which the elevator conveyor is in alignment with the lower conveyor to form a lower transport path for transfer of articles from the lower conveyor to the elevator, and an upper end position in which the elevator conveyor is in alignment with the upper conveyor to form an upper transport path for transfer of articles from the upper conveyor to

the elevator, and controlling the transfer of the articles from the conveyors to the elevator and from the elevator to the conveyors in dependence on a vertical position of the elevator in response to an indication that the elevator has reached an upper trigger position in relation to the one plane during movement from the lower end position to the upper end position, and in response to an indication that the elevator has reached a lower trigger position in relation to the other plane during movement from the upper end position to the lower end position.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWING

[0012] Other features and advantages of the present invention will be more readily apparent upon reading the following description of currently preferred exemplified embodiments of the invention with reference to the accompanying drawing, in which:

[0013] FIG. 1 is a schematic illustration of a transport system according to the present invention; and

[0014] FIG. 2 is a block diagram showing the relationship and operation of the components of the transport system according to the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

[0015] Throughout all the Figures, same or corresponding elements are generally indicated by same reference numerals. These depicted embodiments are to be understood as illustrative of the invention and not as limiting in any way. It should also be understood that the drawings are not necessarily to scale and that the embodiments are sometimes illustrated by graphic symbols, phantom lines, diagrammatic representations and fragmentary views. In certain instances, details which are not necessary for an understanding of the present invention or which render other details difficult to perceive may have been omitted.

[0016] Turning now to the drawing, and in particular to FIG. 1, there is shown a schematic illustration of a transport system according to the present invention, including two fixed conveyors 1, 2, which are superposed in a vertical direction in spaced-apart planes, and an elevator 4 which is disposed next to the conveyors 1, 2 (in FIG. 1 to the right of the conveyors 1, 2) and includes an elevator conveyor 5. As indicated by double arrow 6, the elevator 4 is able to shuttle between an upper end position, indicated by continuous line 7, and a lower end position, indicated by continuous line 8. The conveyors 1, 2 and the elevator conveyor 5 are each constructed in the form of an endless conveyor belt which is driven by a drive motor M for operating the conveyor belt.

[0017] A control unit 13, shown in FIG. 2, is provided to control operation

of the elevator 4 between the end positions 7, 8, as will be described furtherbelow.

[0018] In the upper end position of the elevator 4, the conveyor 5 of the elevator 4 is in alignment with the upper conveyor 1 and defines a transport path to allow transfer of articles 3 therebetween, and in the lower end position, the elevator conveyor 5 is in alignment with the lower conveyor 2 to define a respective transport path to allow transfer of articles 3 therebetween. Although not shown in FIG. 1, the conveyors 1, 2 may, of course, be disposed in the spaced-apart planes also in offset relationship, i.e. on either side of the elevator 4. In this case, the conveying direction of the conveyors 1, 2 remains the same, and, unlike the configuration of the transport system of FIG. 1, there is no need to reverse the conveying direction of the elevator conveyor 5.

[0019] In the exemplified illustration of FIG. 1, the elevator 4 is positioned in the upper end position 7 so that the elevator conveyor 5 forms with the upper conveyor 1 a transport path for receiving an article 3, e.g. container for baggage, from the conveyor 1. Both, conveyor 1 and elevator conveyor 5 run at about the same speed. The transport direction of the article 3 is shown by way of arrow 6a.

[0020] As the elevator 4 approaches the upper end position 7 during its ascent from the lower end position 8, the elevator 4 passes a signaling member 9 which is associated to the upper end position 7. Likewise, as the elevator 4

approaches the lower end position 8 during its descent from the upper end position 7, the elevator 4 passes a signaling member 10 which is associated to the lower end position 7. The signaling members 9, 10 are constructed as sensors in the form of a light barrier. Other types of such sensors include light scanner, inductive sensor, mechanical sensor or ultrasonic sensor. The signaling member 9 is positioned at a distance inwardly of the upper end position 7 to define a predetermined upper trigger position 11, whereas the signaling member 10 is positioned at a distance inwardly of to the lower end position 8 to define a predetermined lower trigger position 11a.

[0021] The signaling members 9, 10 are operatively connected to the control unit 13 which receives a trigger signal from the signaling members 9, 10, when the elevator 4 passes the trigger position 11 during travel from the lower end position 8 to the upper end position 7, or when the elevator 4 passes the trigger position 11a during travel from the upper end position 7 to the lower end position 8.

[0022] The operation of the transport system will now be described with reference to the example shown in FIG. 1: During ascent from the lower end position 8, operation of the conveyor 5 of the elevator 4 is suitably halted. As the elevator 4 passes the trigger position 11 in its approach to the upper end position 7, the control unit 13 activates the drive motor M of the elevator 4 to start operation of the conveyor 5, and at the same time activates the drive motor M of

the conveyor 1 either immediately or after a predetermined delay time. As a consequence, the article 3 is already in motion in transport direction 6a before the elevator 4 reaches the upper end position 7 and thus can be transferred without time delay to the elevator conveyor 5, when the elevator 4 reaches the upper end position 7, whereby the elevator conveyor 5 runs at about a same speed as the conveyor 1.

[0023] When the elevator 4 has received the article 3 and has started its descent to the lower end position, the elevator conveyor 5, which transports the article 3 in horizontal direction, can be halted again. Stoppage of the conveyor 5 during movement of the elevator 4 may be realized by additional sensors (not shown) or any other suitable mechanism. When the elevator 4 passes the signaling member 10 and thus the lower trigger position 11a in its approach to the lower end position 8, the elevator conveyor 5 of the elevator 4 is started to run again. At the same time, also the conveyor 2 can be started immediately or after a predetermined delay time. In this way, a smooth transfer of the article 3 to the conveyor 2 is realized as soon as the elevator 4 reaches the lower end position 8.

[0024] The control unit 13 in conjunction with the signaling members 9, 10 thus operates in such a manner that the article 3 is transferred at the desired speed to the elevator 4 from the conveyors 1, 2, or from the conveyors 1, 2 to the elevator 4, when the elevator 4 has reached the respective end positions 7, 8.

[0025] In order to enhance the overall safety, the transport system is provided with two safety locks 12 which are actuated by the elevator 4 in dependence on the vertical position of the elevator 4 and prevent a drop of the articles 3 into the elevator shaft, when the elevator 4 has not reached the intended position. As shown in FIG. 1, the upper one of the locks 2 occupies the down position to allow the transfer of articles 3, while the lower lock 12 occupies the up position.

[0026] While the invention has been illustrated and described in connection with currently preferred embodiments shown and described in detail, it is not intended to be limited to the details shown since various modifications and structural changes may be made without departing in any way from the spirit of the present invention. The embodiments were chosen and described in order to best explain the principles of the invention and practical application to thereby enable a person skilled in the art to best utilize the invention and various embodiments with various modifications as are suited to the particular use contemplated.

[0027] What is claimed as new and desired to be protected by Letters Patent is set forth in the appended claims and includes equivalents of the elements recited therein: